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ABSTRACT

Writing instructors sometimes initiate innovative teaching techniques based on misleading assumptions about student backgrounds. Such conjectures may cause confusion unless instructors provide non-threatening feedback loops for students to discuss issues that affect the course learning environment: issues they are often reluctant to raise because they worry about their grades. To overcome the dilemma of gaining authentic student input on teaching techniques while a course is going on, Edward Nuhfer suggests student management teams (SMTs) as a way to decenter classroom authority. SMTs collaborate with the students in the class and the instructor to improve the course. The educator/author has used SMTs in three very different classroom environments: a literature course for advanced ESL students; a composition course for traditional college students; and a technical writing course for adult students at night. In each case, his assumptions about the students and the courses were changed, based on feedback from his SMTs. As a result, the learning environment in each course improved, and student confusion, frustration, and discontent declined. After procedures for organizing an SMT are explained, ideas from systems thinking and quality control are used to analyze the educator's involvement with SMTs and to provide suggestions for best practice. Although the educator is very positive about the SMT concept, some of its drawbacks are also discussed. A 5-item bibliography of current literature is appended, as are a comparison/contrast chart of the SMT differences between the ESL, traditional, and adult learning classes, and an educational adaptation of Deming's 14 points for quality control. (NKA)

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Student Management Teams: Redesigning Course Contexts to Empower Writers

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M. Mutschelknaus

CS 217 377

Summary

Writing instructors sometimes initiate innovative teaching techniques based on misleading assumptions about student backgrounds. Such conjectures may cause confusion unless instructors provide non-threatening feedback loops for students to discuss issues that affect the course learning environment: issues they are often reluctant to raise because they worry about their grades. To overcome the dilemma of gaining authentic student input on teaching techniques while a course is going on, Nuhfer suggests student management teams (SMT) as a way to decenter classroom authority. An SMT collaborates with the students in the class and the instructor in order to improve the course.

I have used SMTs in three very different classroom environments: a literature course for advanced ESL students, a composition course for traditional college students, and a technical writing course for adult students at night. In each case, my assumptions about the students and the courses were changed, based on the feedback from my SMTs. As a result, the learning environment in each course improved; student confusion, frustration, and discontent declined.

After procedures for organizing an SMT are explained, I use ideas from systems thinking and quality control to analyze my involvement with SMTs and to provide suggestions for best practice. Although I am very positive about the SMT concept, I also discuss some of its drawbacks.

At the end of the essay, I append a bibliography of current literature on the subject, a comparison/contrast chart of the SMT differences between my ESL, traditional, and adult learner classes, and an educational adaption of Deming's 14 points for quality control.

Table of Contents

PROCEDURES FOR ORGANIZING A STUDENT MANAGEMENT TEAM 2

NUHFER'S ORIGINAL SUGGESTION 3
RESPONSIBILITIES OF STUDENT MANAGERS 3
RESPONSIBILITIES OF INSTRUCTORS 3
RESPONSIBILITIES OF STUDENTS 4

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE SMT CONCEPT 5

SYSTEMS THINKING 5
QUALITY CONTROL IDEAS 5

APPLICATION OF SYSTEMS THINKING AND QUALITY CONTROL IDEAS TO THREE DIFFERENT TYPES OF LEARNERS THAT I TEACH. 6

ADULT COLLEGE LEARNERS 6
ESL LEARNERS 7
TRADITIONAL COLLEGE FRESHMEN 7

SUGGESTIONS FOR BEST PRACTICE 8

CONCLUSION 8

CONTACT INFORMATION 8

DEMING'S 14 POINTS ADAPTED FOR EDUCATION 10

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF CURRENT LITERATURE ON SUBJECT 11

COMPARISON/CONTRAST CHART OF MY STUDENT MANAGEMENT TEAMS 12

Mary, a recent college graduate, enjoyed her studies in English because of its emphasis on proficiency in writing strategies and computer software acumen. At her first job interview, however, she was taken aback. "What experience in teamwork and collaboration do you have?" one interviewer asked her.

Procedures for organizing an SMT

In order to solve Mary's dilemma, the following section contains Edward Nuhfer's original suggestions for implementing student management teams, SMT responsibilities, instructor responsibilities, and class responsibilities.

Nuhfer's original suggestion

Edward Nuhfer's article "Student Management Teams--the Heretic's Path To Teaching Success" inspired me to implement my student management teams. According to Nuhfer, "Students, in conjunction with their instructor, are responsible for the success of any course. As student managers, your special responsibility is to monitor this course through your own experience, to receive comments from other students, to work as a team with your instructor on a regular basis, and to make recommendations to the instructor about how this course can be improved" (114).

Responsibilities of Student Managers

The SMT has four main functions. First, its members obtain and record student comments in a journal over the course of the semester. The journal then becomes a valuable resource for the instructor the next time she teaches the course. Second, the SMT members record their own observations in the journal about the progress of the

class. In essence, they are the class ethnographers. Third, they recommend course improvements to the instructor based upon the collective class voice. Finally, they work as a team with the instructor on a regular basis in order to improve the course.

The SMT meets with the class every week for fifteen minutes to half an hour, without me there, to discuss issues, and they meet with me every two weeks to present their suggestions.

Responsibilities of instructors

As an instructor, you have five primary responsibilities. First, you must make sure that students and SMT members understand the difference between SMT work and course work. Of course, any compensation for being a student manager must be separate from the course grade. I usually invite my team over to my house for a special dinner at the end of the course, or take them out for pizza. Second you must allow class to select most of the team. You choose one member. My teams usually consist of three members, two elected by the class, one chosen by me. In general, one SMT member for every 6 to 7 students is an appropriate ratio. SMTs shouldn't be larger than seven members however, or else they become too unwieldy. Third, you should meet with the team in a neutral setting, not the classroom or your office. Educational architecture reinforces power differentials--something you want to avoid emphasizing with your SMT. Fourth, you should inform the SMT that comments from the class must remain anonymous. Finally, you should give the team a semester-long mandate to focus on. For example, if you want to improve your higher level questioning skills, you might ask them to examine that issue during the course of the semester. Or, if you want to improve your ability to handle racially-charged topics, you might ask them to examine that issue. Without such a

mandate, SMTs often flounder because they feel they do not have a strong initial purpose or reason for existence.

Responsibilities of students

Students in the class who are not on the SMT also have responsibilities. They must understand that the SMT is there not only as a conduit for traditional complaints about courses, such as textbook choices and methods of assessment, but also as a tool to improve the quality of their learning in the course. They must therefore actively participate with the SMT in order to decide which course items are the responsibility of students to improve and which are the responsibility of the teacher to improve. The SMT concept is a very effective method for making students responsible their own learning outcomes. SMTs provide models for students of the life-long learning concept.

Theoretical foundations of the SMT concept

The following section discusses the theoretical foundations of the SMT concept--quality control and systems thinking--so that practitioners can understand why the technique works so well.

Systems thinking

Some of the basic principles of systems thinking help to explain why SMT work so well. First, in a system all interconnected parts function as a whole. Second, systems change if pieces are added or deleted. Cutting a system in half, for example, does not create two smaller systems but rather one broken system. Finally, the behavior of a system depends on its structure. If the structure changes, the behavior changes. The concept of feedback, of course, is crucial in each principle. (O'Connor & McDermott, 3).

These principles can be applied to courses with SMTs. First, SMTs help connect teachers and students in the common enterprise of learning. Second, SMTs help to ensure that teachers do not add erroneous items to the learning experience or delete essential learning components. An SMT, for example, can efficiently inform an instructor if more review of a concept is necessary. Finally, SMTs help teachers to alter the structure of courses so that more effective learning behaviors can occur.

Quality control ideas

Edward Nuhfer originally conceived of the idea for student management teams because of Edward Deming's 14 points for management--the idea that started the quality control revolution. A few of the points merit our special attention. Principle number eight, for example, states "Drive out fear, so that everyone may work effectively for the company." SMTs help people to accomplish this goal because they remove student fears that constructive course criticism on their parts may irrevocably harm their final grades. Principle number nine mandates that barriers between departments should be broken down so that the whole organization may work as a team. SMTs help people to accomplish this goal because the barriers between teacher and student are removed so that everyone can work together to improve the course. Principle number fourteen states that everybody should work to accomplish transformations within organizations, not just administration. SMTs help to accomplish this because they permit all students in the class to contribute ideas for improvement.

Application of systems thinking and quality control ideas to three different types of learners that I teach.

These ideas about systems thinking and quality control have improved three very different college classroom environments for me: adult night course environments, ESL advanced course environments, and traditional freshman composition requirements.

Adult college learners

In night classes for adult nontraditional college students, I most recently used a student management team in an introductory technical writing class. Because of the variety of learner backgrounds in the class, our adult learner student management team consequently had a mandate to focus on teaching techniques and types of assignments. In collaboration with the SMT, I reviewed comments and impressions of the class period. Students were able to tell me which group exercises succeeded and which flagged; which points were clear and which were confusing; and when the class was enthusiastic or tired. Very early in the course, the SMT also made a major assignment decision. They informed me that my criteria for their final projects, worth 50% of their course grade, were unclear. This information allowed me to specify my assignment descriptions quickly, so that students could start work on their projects without confusion.

ESL learners

In ESL courses, I most recently used a student management team in a literature survey course for university international students. Although I enjoy teaching ESL students, I am always concerned about my students' ability to comprehend the abstract language in our texts and the meta-language I sometimes must use to clarify symbols and

metaphors. The words and concepts would be difficult for U.S. students, much more so for international ones. My ESL student management team consequently had a mandate to check for comprehension problems due to cross-cultural communication. Without such teams, I feared that I would make erroneous assumptions about my students' learning and background knowledge that would eventually destroy the diversity of ideas in my ESL courses.

Traditional college freshmen

In a recent freshman composition course, I used a student management team to help me guide the students through Toni Morrison's Paradise and Kingston's The Woman Warrior. The class was mixed, 5 African-Americans and 20 Caucasians. Because the books deal, in part, with inter-racial and cross-gender conflicts, the SMT had a mandate to focus on how I and the class handled these issues in class discussions. Early on in the semester, however, the SMT helped to foment a class mutiny. Paradise, they claimed, was simply too difficult a book to read, and my teaching did not make it any easier to understand. Neither the SMT or any of the students came up with any constructive methods for me to help them read Morrison or Kingston. The lesson I learned from the experience is that not even an SMT can fix all course problems.

Suggestions for best practice

My experience with SMTs has led me to conclude that it is neither my role as instructor nor the SMT's role as intermediary that determines the success or failure of course, but rather how much the students in the course who are not members of the SMT buy into the concept. If they do not provide the SMT with any suggestions or enthusiasm,

it will be difficult for the SMT to do a good job. It is the instructor's job to create a class culture that is enthusiastic about the SMT concept. To that end, the instructor should actively encourage class members to collaborate with the SMT, emphasize SMT efforts in class, and consistently praise students for their cooperative efforts.

Conclusion

As for Mary, the woman at the job interview, she thought about the interviewer's question for a moment, then confidently answered, "I was part of a management team in one of my courses." She then described the student collaboration that created a better learning environment.

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Deming's 14 points adapted for education

These points are quoted and adapted from pages 23 and 24 of Out of the Crisis.

1. Create constancy of purpose in students toward improvement of learning processes.
2. Help students to adopt a new philosophy of managing their own learning.
3. Cease dependence on graded inspections to achieve quality. Help students to create quality in the first place.
4. End the practice of rewarding students on the basis of grades alone. Move toward rewarding students for learning processes, not creating products.
5. Focus on constant learning improvement.
6. Teach discipline-specific success skills in every course.
7. Encourage student leadership through mentoring and other methods.
8. Drive out fear so that every student can learn effectively.
9. Break down barriers between students and teachers.
10. Eliminate slogans and exhortations as teaching techniques.
11. Help students to create work that they take pride in.
12. Put all students in the course to work in order to accomplish transformative learning.

Bibliography of current literature on subject

☑ Joseph O'Connor and Ian McDermott. The Art of Systems Thinking. London: Harper Collins, 1997. *Although there are many texts out there about systems thinking, this book is a gentle introduction to the field. It helped to position my philosophy about teaching within a much larger context.*

☑ W. Edwards Deming. Out of the Crisis. Cambridge MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1982. *Deming's 14 points for quality control in business and industry are also applicable to classrooms. This is the work that started the quality movement.*

☑ Ina and Mike Mutschelknaus. Using Student Management Teams to Improve Technical Writing Courses. Intercom: The Magazine of the Society for Technical Communication. February 2000. *This article explains how a student management team improved our technical writing course. Anyone interested in a copy can e-mail me at* mmutsche@smumn.edu.

☑ Edward Nuhfer. A Handbook for Student Management Teams. Office of Teaching Effectiveness, Campus Box 137, P.O. Box 173364. University of Colorado at Denver. Denver, CO 80217-3364. Phone (303)-556-4915. *Edward Nuhfer originally conceived of the SMT idea. Anyone interested in conducting an SMT should obtain a copy of this crucial implementation guide. It costs 10$.*

☑ Peter Senge. The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization. New York: Doubleday, 1990. *In my opinion, this fusion of Deming's ideas about quality control and the basic tenets of systems thinking creates a synthesis that would enliven the learning in any classroom. Like Out of the Crisis, these business ideas must be adapted for education.*

Comparison/Contrast Chart of my Student Management Teams

Course & Student Population	**Focus of SMT work group**	**Motivation of students and SMT members to improve the learning environment**	**Teacher collaboration with SMT and students**	**Major suggestions made by the SMT**	**Impact of SMT on learning environment**
Multi-cultural literature with university international students	Cross-cultural communication between students and the teacher	Very high. If they didn't succeed in my class, they would have to take a regular Intro to Lit class.	Very high. I learned more about the students cultures than they did about the literature we were reading.	Write everything on the blackboard, allow them to devise midterm and final exam, preview reading assignments.	Very high impact. Students brought several concerns to the SMT that they would have never approached me with.
Technical writing with university non-traditional students at night	Teaching techniques and types of assignments	A spark of interest, not a commitment.	Very high. Since each class was 4 hours long, I needed constant feedback from them.	Explicitly state the criteria for the final project, stop lecturing out of the book.	Moderate. They served mainly as a clearinghouse for student questions and confusions about assignments.
English composition with typical college freshmen	Race and gender issues in class discussions	Very low. Students had to be forced to volunteer for the project.	Moderate. I grew tired of listening to student complaints.	Provide explicit study guides for Toni Morrison's Paradise.	Negligible. They chose to shift their focus to curriculum issues that I was unwilling to negotiate.